

CITY OF BELLEVUE
CITY COUNCIL

Summary Minutes of Study Session

January 20, 2015
6:00 p.m.

Council Conference Room
Bellevue, Washington

PRESENT: Mayor Balducci, Deputy Mayor Wallace, and Councilmembers Chelminiak, Robertson, Robinson, and Stokes

ABSENT: Councilmember Lee

1. Executive Session

Deputy Mayor Wallace opened the meeting at 6:03 p.m., and declared recess to executive session for approximately 30 minutes to discuss one item of property acquisition and one personnel matter.

The meeting resumed at 6:45 p.m., with Mayor Balducci presiding.

2. Study Session

- (a) Transmittal of Downtown Livability Initiative Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) Recommendations

City Manager Brad Miyake opened discussion regarding the work of the Downtown Livability Initiative Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC).

Dan Stroh, Planning Director, noted that the printed report of the CAC encapsulates the findings of the group. The Downtown Livability Initiative was established as a targeted review of regulations that guide Downtown development and land use activity. He said the CAC Co-Chairs would present the committee's recommendations, and no action is requested of the Council this evening.

Ernie Simas, Transportation Commission Member and Co-Chair of the Downtown Livability CAC, said the Council Principles established for this work helped the CAC to focus its efforts. He noted the challenge of striking a balance between competing visions because the CAC was made up of a diverse group of individuals with both common and different interests. He said City

staff did a great job of public outreach throughout the process. However, given the population of Bellevue, he would have liked to see even greater public involvement.

Aaron Laing, Planning Commission Chair and Co-Chair of the CAC, said CAC members were impressed with how forward-thinking and aspirational the Land Use Code was 30 years ago. He said the CAC was a diverse and engaged group of individuals who were not primarily interested in saying what was wrong with the Code, but were valuable in providing specific recommendations and the rationale behind their recommendations.

Mr. Simas reiterated that this is the most extensive update to the Code since 1981, and it incorporates elements from the Downtown Transportation Plan, East Link planning, and Downtown Subarea planning. The CAC held 13 meetings between May 2013 and June 2014, and public comment was accepted at all meetings.

Mr. Laing said the objectives of the Downtown Livability Initiative were to better achieve the vision for the Downtown as vibrant, mixed use center; enhance the pedestrian environment; improve the area as a residential setting; enhance the identity and character of Downtown neighborhoods, and incorporate elements from the Downtown Transportation Plan Update and East Link design work.

Mr. Simas described public outreach activities including 60 meetings with more than 800 participants through open houses, focus groups, walking tours, and community groups. Information was provided on a project web site as well. The CAC found the public input to be very helpful and was able to develop concepts and recommendations based on the ideas generated through outreach efforts.

Mr. Laing said the organizing tool for the CAC's work was a series of audits prepared by City staff. These provided a foundation for considering potential Downtown Land Use Code changes. Mr. Simas noted that the Downtown Subarea population increased from 10,600 jobs and 1,000 residents in 1980 to 43,300 jobs and 10,000 residents in 2012. The 2030 forecast anticipates 70,300 jobs and 19,000 Downtown residents.

Mr. Laing said the CAC developed Code-related and non-Code-related recommendations based on alternatives that were evaluated against Council principles and the sets of evaluation criteria.

Patti Wilma, Project Development Manager, said that public open space was a high priority for CAC members and the public. The CAC recommends incentives for developing open space in the Downtown and for strengthening through-block connections within super blocks. Other recommendations include an open space lid over I-405 connecting to the Wilburton area and the consideration of a funding mechanism for open space acquisition and improvements in the Downtown. Ms. Wilma highlighted a table of open space needs identified by district (e.g., neighborhood parks, plazas, community gardens, outdoor pet areas, and others).

Responding to Mayor Balducci, Ms. Wilma noted that private developments could provide outdoor pet areas as well as the other examples of amenities from the table highlighted above.

Mr. Laing said the intent of the CAC in putting together the table was to identify needs which could be addressed by potential incentives.

Mr. King highlighted the CAC's recommendations regarding the NE 6th Street Pedestrian Corridor, which runs from Bellevue Square to the City Hall Plaza. The audit found that approximately 50 percent of the corridor's capacity for pedestrian amenities remains to be developed.

The CAC's Code-related recommendations include extending the corridor to 112th Avenue NE, providing additional weather protection, providing opportunities for landscaping, integrating bicycle and other wheeled users with pedestrians, and identifying ways and events to activate the corridor. Other recommendations suggest adding pedestrian lighting and wayfinding, exploring partnership opportunities, and considering a new identity for the corridor.

Ms. Wilma described the CAC's recommendations related to design guidelines. These include reformatting portions of the Code to improve the clarity and/or readability. Topical items recommended for attention are building frontages and sidewalk relationships, pedestrian circulation and through-block connections, building and public facility construction materials, façade treatments, rooftop design, views from major public spaces, reinforcing neighborhood character, and ensuring an appropriate interface with neighborhoods adjacent to the Downtown.

Ms. Wilma said there was CAC discussion about whether the design review process worked better administratively or through a design review board structure. Generally speaking, users of the design guidelines expressed that an administrative system is better for the process and the product in terms of the built environment. She noted the suggestion for a departure system versus a variance mechanism in which innovative and attractive design ideas could be accommodated.

Councilmember Robertson questioned the most effective and balanced approach for producing a memorable skyline.

Mr. Simas said that topic was discussed by the CAC. He said there needs to be a mechanism for reviewing and considering ideas that could be supported by the developer, the City, and the public. He said the CAC discussed the value of having pictures available as examples during the design review process to demonstrate what the City is trying to accomplish in the Downtown.

Ms. Robertson recalled that Code provisions related to skybridges were originally targeted for specific streets in an attempt to balance a safe pedestrian environment with vibrant sidewalk-level pedestrian activity. She questioned whether the CAC addressed this topic.

Mr. Laing said it was discussed and there were concerns about losing activity at street level. He observed that the skybridges themselves have proven to provide vibrant pedestrian activity. The issue of whether skybridges will continue to be allowed as part of the Downtown Livability goals will be up to the Council to determine.

Councilmember Chelminiak said one of the key elements of the City's skybridge legislation was that they not be elevator lobby to elevator lobby skybridges. He said the Code contains language limiting the distance between skybridge portals and access to the street, which he believes has been key in the effectiveness of the skybridges in Bellevue.

Mayor Balducci said she wants to be sure that, as the process moves forward, the path of achieving desired elements is clear. She noted that future decisions should address how desired design elements will be handled whether through requirements, incentives, or encouragement and guidance.

Continuing with the presentation, Ms. Wilma said additional topics to be addressed through design guidelines are garbage collection, mechanical equipment, vendor carts, food trucks, vacant sites and buildings, and permitted uses.

Mr. King described recommendations related to the amenity incentive system. Over the past 30 years, the City has allowed bonuses related to development height and density in exchange for developer-provided amenities. The CAC discussed the current 23 amenities in the Land Use Code and suggested updating that list with a focus on amenities most important to achieving livability and the desired future vision for the Downtown. The amenity system should allow the flexibility to encourage creative design and must reflect realistic, feasible incentives.

Additional recommendations are to make weather protection a development requirement, consider neighborhood-specific weighting for certain amenities, develop a method for considering alternative amenities, and to update the economics of the amenity incentive system. Mr. King highlighted the list of existing amenities (e.g., pedestrian oriented frontage, landscape features, parking, public art, and others) and potential new amenities (e.g., gathering places, pocket parks and urban courtyards, activated rooftops, affordable housing, historic preservation, and others).

Responding to Councilmember Robertson, Mr. Laing said there was a great deal of conversation by the CAC about the amenity system. There was concern that identifying certain elements as eligible incentives now might not be the elements desired into the future.

Mr. Laing said the CAC was reluctant to get into the area of how much credit a developer would need to receive for a certain amenity in order for it to be considered an incentive. The CAC recommends that the City provide incentives for desired elements. However, the group was not prepared to determine what developers would consider to be incentives or to recommend specific language for any given incentive.

Mr. Simas suggested that one way to address the value of incentives is to assess which existing incentives have and have not been used. If some have not been used, it might be that the level of the incentive is not high enough to appeal to developers. The CAC recommends that this question be referred to the Planning Commission or another body for further study. Another issue regarding incentives is the length of time an amenity would or should exist within a development (e.g., a child care facility).

Councilmember Robertson said she appreciates the list of potential new incentives for consideration. She would be supportive of hiring a consultant to help staff evaluate whether specific incentives add value from a developer's point of view.

Councilmember Robertson questioned whether there is still a need for the incentive for underground parking. She said land values are so high that developers must build underground parking in order for their projects to be feasible.

Mr. Laing said staff presented to the CAC a sample of a design review permit for a Downtown project which included the amenity table. One issue this demonstrated was that, if structured or underground parking and/or a residential component within the project is provided, a project can increase its floor-area ratio (FAR) and allowed height when compared to the base Code. The problem was that it was not clear whether, if the underground parking was removed, other amenities in the Code would allow the same project. This issue of how specific details affect one another made the CAC reluctant to suggest removing any existing incentives without a fundamental recalculation based on zoning.

Councilmember Stokes said the discussion illustrates the complexity of this subject and he is pleased with the work to date. He noted a reference in the materials to an existing incentive for performing arts space related to a development project. While not specifically a part of the Downtown Livability study, he hopes the conversation will be expanded to looking at other elements of livability and amenities such as the Tateuchi Center (Performing Arts Center Eastside).

In terms of further public outreach, Mr. Stokes said he would like to see a next stage of engaging Bellevue's citizens outside of the Downtown about what they would like to see in their City's Downtown.

Councilmember Robinson thanked staff for the thoughtful presentation and said it is exciting to see the potential for new amenity incentives. She likes the incentive for historic preservation and suggested there could be opportunities to partner with the Eastside Heritage Center. Similarly, she suggested developers partnering with the City's Parks Department in providing open spaces.

Continuing, Mr. King said the Downtown Livability CAC functions as the Station Area Planning Committee for the Downtown Light Rail Station and Transit Center.

Mr. King said the CAC discussed potential Code changes related to building height and form. Recognizing that this topic generally raises concerns with the public, the CAC developed principles guiding this work. The CAC determined that additional height or density provisions should result in a better urban design outcome than the status quo and add to the character and memorability of the Downtown.

Mr. King said the CAC recommends, among other suggestions, that further exploration should be done to consider building heights up to 600 feet in the 01 District where 450 feet is currently

allowed. In the 02 District, the CAC recommends consideration of increasing height limits from 250 feet to 300 feet for residential development. Mr. King said more details on all of the CAC's recommendations in this area are provided beginning on page 45 of the full Downtown Livability CAC's report. He briefly highlighted remaining recommendations for different districts within the Downtown.

Noting the time, Mayor Balducci requested that the next presentation on building height, form and density include tools to illustrate the differences between existing and potential heights and other requirements from the perspective of an individual walking through the Downtown.

Ms. Balducci asked staff to separate differences directly related to building height and form versus those related to increased density. She recalled that past discussions were interested in encouraging a variety of more interesting and appealing building forms and designs. She observed that it appears from the presentation that a conclusion has been made that greater density is needed. However, she did not necessarily get that sense from the CAC's report.

Mayor Balducci said it is important to understand what is being proposed and why, and what that means in terms of actual development and the street-level experience. She would like to understand how the Downtown Transportation Plan aligns with the Downtown Livability work as well.

Councilmember Robertson agreed about the need for a more robust discussion on building height, form and density. It would be good for staff to provide the Council with the broad points of the CAC's discussions and the reasoning of the CAC behind the recommendations. She said the Council has been receiving emails from Downtown residents regarding a number of concerns including sunlight, air quality, the wind tunnel effect between buildings, and other items.

Mayor Balducci summarized that there are essentially three ways to achieve desired development: 1) the public sector can provide it, 2) the City can provide incentives for others to provide it, and 3) the private sector can be required to provide desired elements.

Mayor Balducci invited Chair Laing to provide the Planning Commission Report planned for the later Regular Session.

Mr. Laing provided a general update on the Planning Commission's activities. Key topics over the past six months have been Code changes to address single-family residential room rentals and recreational marijuana retail regulations, as well as the Comprehensive Plan Update. The Planning Commission will again review the Housing Element and the Utilities Element of the Comprehensive Plan during its January 28 meeting, both of which have a high level of community interest.

The Commission also plans to discuss an idea originally raised by the Council which is to create a separate Neighborhood Element within the Comprehensive Plan. He said Mike McCormick Huentelman and the Neighborhood Outreach staff have developed a strong Neighborhood Element for the Commission's discussion. The Commission will issue a public draft of the

Comprehensive Plan Update by its February 11 meeting and anticipates transmitting it to the Council by the end of March.

Mayor Balducci thanked Mr. Laing, Mr. Simas, and City staff for their work and update on Downtown Livability. She acknowledged that the Downtown Livability process has been more extensive and demanding of everyone's time and energy than originally anticipated, and the Council appreciates everyone's dedication.

At approximately 8:02 p.m., Mayor Balducci declared recess to Regular Session.

Myrna L. Basich, MMC
City Clerk

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